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PUPIL REACTIONS TO THE CLASSICS

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To gauge with any degree of accuracy student reactions to anything is not easy, nor are the results of such attempts likely to prove especially comforting to the inquirer. To arrive, if possible, at a notion of what students of English actually think of the books prescribed for study in class, I sent out questionnaires to the seventeen hundred boys and girls registered in English courses in Lincoln High School. I did it in haste and make no claim to great penetration in the questions I asked. The papers were handed back unsigned, with no other designation than boy or girl and the year in high school. They were taken up at once and dumped in overpowering piles in my room. From the answers I concluded that students had felt perfectly free to answer what they pleased.

For ten days after I sent out the sheet, every boy or girl who had any time on his hands in study hall or library was detailed to help me with my tabulation. A few came so regularly that they acted as if they felt themselves to be the authors of the whole project and managed the others with capability and authority; but for the most part I had to break in a new office force every few hours. One boy was so enamored of the work that he offered to skip all his classes to help out in the process of eating up the piles of raw material. Three times he pleaded to skip English, "It won't make a bit of difference. Shucks! it's only English." He was unaware that this argument might not especially appeal to me. News-writing classes thirsted for a "story"; so whenever any of their number came for work they tabulated little, but earnestly studied the figures to see what they might make of the complicated pattern.

On the questionnaire I listed the twenty-five books which we study most in class, asked ten specific questions about each, and

called for remarks. At the foot of the paper I asked four general questions, "Which of all the books did you like best?" "Which least?" "Which has helped you most?" "What suggestions for change have you to make?" Some did not answer these questions at all. The figures on them were soonest reached, and I shall consider them first in this paper.

In all grades above the ninth (they are not read in the ninth) *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Silas Marner* lead all the rest in favor, with *The Lady of the Lake* and *Idylls of the King* pretty well snowed under, as shown by the scattering votes in the "liked best" column and the substantial numbers in the "liked least" column.

Some of the suggestions follow. From all four grades, from boys and girls alike, comes a plea for modern books, something up to date. "Drop ancient books like *The Lady of the Lake* and put in *When a Man's a Man*, by Harold Bell Wright." "Add some stories that in years to come will be wonderful, but that are young now." There are some specific comments which show individual taste: "*Silas Marner* should not have in it the place where the lady dies in the snow." "There shouldn't be so much sorrow in *The Merchant of Venice*"; "There are too many big words in *The Merchant of Venice* and the *Odyssey*"; "I should like more conversation in books." The writer of the last remark is at one with readers young and old in libraries, who, I am told by librarians, decide upon books according to the amount of conversation in evidence.

There is a scattering request for the removal of nearly every book on the list, but the demand stiffens in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Lady of the Lake* and the *Odyssey*. The last of these presents the most interesting case. I found twenty students saying, "Take out the *Odyssey*," even "Burn the *Odyssey*." "It is too strong for Freshmen," says a ninth-grade boy. "Don't give it to Freshmen," or "to children," say several tenth-grade girls, evidently with the memory of their own hardships heavy upon them. Half a dozen compromise by suggesting a later grade for it. But despite these uncomplimentary comments, the *Odyssey* runs strong, as later figures show. For every one who says "to the eternal bonfire with it," two say it is wonderful, stirring, illuminating to their history and other reading and so on.

A list of books suggested to replace almost any of those now in use follows:

<i>Seventeen</i>	<i>Oregon Trail</i>
<i>Oliver Twist</i>	<i>The Alhambra</i>
<i>Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come</i>	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
<i>Treasure Island</i>	<i>Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes</i>
<i>Horseman of the Plains</i>	<i>A Study in Scarlet</i>
<i>As You Like It</i>	<i>Ben Hur</i>
<i>The Melting Pot</i>	<i>The Promised Land</i>
<i>The Talisman</i>	<i>The Unknown Wrestler</i>
<i>Les Misérables</i> ¹	

While the number of those who want less poetry and more prose equals that of those who want more poetry and less prose, there is nothing to offset the demand for more drama and brisk narrative. The pupils seem sure that they want more plays. "Let us read more of Scott and Shakespeare," say two; "more books with action like *Captains Courageous*, *Ivanhoe*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*," says a boy; "less description," "more humor," "books by Mark Twain, Zane Grey, and Bowers," urge others.

There is little of a moralizing tone. One conscientious twelfth-grade boy says, "Let us have longer stories, as I am likely to forget the short ones unless they make a very deep impression on me." He evidently wishes his education to stick. Another flies in the face of the statistics with "Let them all read *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It is not easy; but once read, never forgotten."

A frequently recurring comment is that we read too slowly: "Let us read more books faster." "Don't read so slowly in class with unnecessary questions. Make it more like a story." "Don't repeat what we have read in the grades." "Some new books should be ordered, for these have been read by pupils for years. They are books which are read a lot before you get into high school and then they are old and it is really labor to have to read them."

In the figures gleaned from the whole table I cannot strike grand totals because Seniors have not read some of the books which are now read in ninth grade, and ninth-grade students (far the largest group) have not read most of the classics. In the ninth-

¹ This from four who no doubt think it will prove easier reading than *The Lady of the Lake*.

grade group the *Odyssey* leads the list for both their favor and their disfavor, followed in favor at a considerable distance by *The Lady of the Lake*, a collection of short stories by Mikels, and *Silas Marner*. The figures on the *Odyssey* show that students do not feel neutral about it; they either like or dislike it heartily.

In the three remaining groups *Silas Marner* leads in favor closely followed by *The Merchant of Venice*, *the Lady of The Lake*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and at a considerable distance by the *Odyssey*, and the *Idylls of the King*.

The chief difference between the answers of the boys and those of the girls lies in the placing of such books as *Captains Courageous* and *Ivanhoe* higher in the boys' lists, and *the Idylls of the King* lower.

The members of the English faculty generously answered a questionnaire also. Six of the fifteen who answered feel that they get the best results from *A Tale of Two Cities*. *Silas Marner* comes next. Five like least to teach *The Lady of the Lake* and two feel that they get their best results from it. Only two admit being weary of *The Lady of the Lake* and one does not enjoy the *Odyssey*. Ten feel that we read too little, Two are of the opinion that we should read fewer books and do them more thoroughly. I add these findings because they may throw some light on student reactions. All agree that classes and conditions vary so widely that they cannot respond with much definiteness.

Out of the maze I make a few deductions, but with hesitation, We are doubtless reading some books that we may well omit. One of these is, for our school, I believe, *The Merchant of Venice*, because it is read too generally in the grades, where, by the way, it seems to me it should not be read. It is often enough misunderstood at high-school age. I am inclined to add *The Lady of the Lake* though the statistics do not bear me out. In the total tabulation, where seventeen hundred sheets were examined, many more readers reported that they liked this book than reported the contrary. As I said above, among the teachers, two reported that they got their best results from this book and four their poorest. Many students evidently felt a hearty dislike for it. It is a bright narrative, with some stirring lines, interesting for Scottish background,

but it should be read, rather than studied. Whenever in the English department we have felt like omitting it, we have reassured ourselves with the belief that the children like it. Now we find that large numbers consider it "too hard to understand," "not true to life." Might it not be well to use something else while we give this a rest?

The figures show no book doomed. At first glance, the *Odyssey* seems to be the object of a vigorous antipathy, but later answers reveal other considerations. Large numbers report that they have re-read it with pleasure, have found increasing use for it in their other studies, have met references to it constantly; in short, find on later inspection that it is good. Only one teacher feels that in her classes she gets poor results from it.

Perhaps, then, the real difficulties lie in the way these books are often handled or in the failure to suit the book to the class. How shall we meet our problem? Shall we continue reading our present classics forever? Shall we remove them in deference to what the trade calls a "well-marked demand"? Shall we supply drama instead of the *Odyssey*, which is "stale," "too hard," "uninteresting in our day," in the eyes of some? Shall we fall in with the suggestion of plenty of the writers on matters educational that we take the child where he is and feed him Zane Grey and the *Saturday Evening Post* in class if that is what he normally reads outside?

I believe we must stiffen our backs against any actual lowering of standards. We cannot afford to do no better than the motion pictures in our offerings. This does not mean, however, that we need hold grimly to *The Lady of the Lake* as if it were the only narrative poem that could meet all demands. It does not mean either that we must ply students with *The Merchant of Venice* after two-thirds of them have read it in the grades. We shall keep the *Odyssey*. But we cannot risk losing our students, especially in their first taste of high school.

Most of us who have tried out all sorts of methods can see the classes that have left our hands liking or not liking certain books. Some books fit some classes especially ill. *The Merchant of Venice* may be so handled that the race problem rankles sharply; *Captains Courageous* and even well-beloved *Silas Marner* may prove by

their unfamiliar dialect unnecessarily difficult to groups who are none too well grounded in the English language. Should there not be elasticity enough to make it possible for a teacher to omit some texts and to substitute others? Buying enough books to supply all tastes in the real difficulty. I incline to think, however, that, given a reasonable class, a method may be found to make any of these books palatable. What are the chief reasons why some students dislike certain books?

To start with, we can blame the motion pictures for much of the modern reader's distaste for anything but swiftly moving action. Descriptions, except of the briefest, character analysis—all of this is boring. His outside substitute for reading gives him no place for it. A solid fifteen-year-old boy, unceremoniously transferred to my class, was trying to read *A Tale of Two Cities* by himself. He was in dead earnest, but nearly ready to give up at times. One day we were chattering about it. "Just look here," he mourned, flicking several pages, "Not one word of conversation in all that!"

What do we, the teachers, do to make or mar a book? Overcare to make every detail clear has made a piece a weariness to many. In our desire to possess the student of every bit of our carefully acquired information we lead to his protests voiced in the questionnaire, that he would like "more of a story and not so many questions," that he couldn't "see any sense in so much dramatizing in *Ivanhoe*," that "there is too much outlining in *The Lady of the Lake*," that "teachers ask too many questions."

I read over recently a set of papers written after we had finished *A Tale of Two Cities*. I know a time when I should have been sick at heart to see how much they did not know about the book. Now I argue, "Why worry over the loss of that one book of Dickens or some part of it? Will it not be better if, because of it, the reader is tempted to read more of the same author than it would be if he had stayed so long with this that he never dreams of opening *Great Expectations* or *David Copperfield*?"

We are about convinced that we should read more books rapidly. A few need careful study. Any method that helps boys and girls to read widely for pleasure seems to me legitimate. I read recently in the *English Journal* a paper entitled "Why *Treasure Island*?"

I believe it would be well for all of us to scrutinize our classics and ask, Why these? Why not others? Why not more drama? More modern matter? Why take so long to read *Ivanhoe* when it ought to be read in haste? Why lead students to feel that reading "ancient books" (meaning *Idylls of the King*) involves studying every figure of speech and every unusual word for its own sake?

As I said above, I have not made much out of the questionnaire. I intend to study it further. At present I feel sure of only one thing. We want students to read books in class for the sake of getting them to want more books. When we fail, we must change either the method or the book, perhaps both.